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# **ETHNIC VOTING IN PRIMARY ELECTIONS: THE IRISH AND ITALIANS OF PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND**

**by Richard A. Gabriel**

**RESEARCH SERIES**

**Number 12**

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**Bureau of Government Research  
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## INTRODUCTION

Once again, the Bureau of Government Research is pleased to make available for general distribution the results of scholarly research by students of government. Mr. Gabriel, a 1966 Master of Arts graduate of the University of Rhode Island, is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts. His study, *Ethnic Voting in Primary Elections: The Irish and Italians of Providence, Rhode Island*, is an outgrowth of research in preparation of his doctoral dissertation, which he is now completing.

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Kingston, Rhode Island

Spring, 1969

# **Ethnic Voting in Primary Elections: The Irish and Italians of Providence, Rhode Island**

by  
**Richard A. Gabriel**

For years urban politicians in the northeastern section of the country have assumed the existence of something called the "ethnic vote." The substance of this assumption is that members of ethnic groups tend to cast their votes in heavier numbers for candidates which share the ethnic background of the group. Thus, Italians are supposed to cast more votes for Italian candidates than for Irish candidates and vice versa for the Irish. A corollary belief is that ethnic groups are likely to desert a political party that refuses to offer them candidates whose backgrounds are similar to that of the ethnic group. This desertion is most likely to occur when the opposing party does in fact offer such candidates, that is, when a real alternative is available. The attempt to keep ethnic groups loyal results in the curious phenomenon known as ticket balancing or "united nations politics." In such circumstances, the party attempts to maintain the loyalty of various ethnic groups by placing at least one candidate from each group on the party ticket. That politicians have acted upon their faith in ethnic politics is an historical fact.<sup>1</sup> The most important question is, however, do ethnic groups respond to the balanced ticket in the way politicians expect? Or, to put the matter another way, what is the importance of ethnicity as a factor in voting behavior?

The scholarly research on the subject, while fairly extensive, has hardly been conclusive. Most of it can be safely reduced to two schools of thought: the assimilation theory and the mobilization theory. The assimilation theory maintains that ethnic similarity between a candidate and an ethnic group is likely to be important in voting behavior when the group thinks of itself, and is regarded by others, as somewhat unique, and when members of the group perceive this "in-group" relationship.<sup>2</sup> These conditions are most likely to exist when the ethnic group occupies the lowest positions on the socio-economic scale.<sup>3</sup> As members of

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnic composition of the Rhode Island Congressional delegation is an excellent example. It is deliberately designed to appeal to the most important ethnic groups in the state, and is comprised of an Italian, a Frenchman, an Irishman and a Yankee.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Wolfinger, "The Development and Persistence of Ethnic Voting Behavior," *American Political Science Review* (December, 1965), p. 896.

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 32-36.

the ethnic group move up the socio-economic ladder, the group's perception of its ethnic uniqueness diminishes as socio-economic issues become more salient events in the making of electoral choices.<sup>4</sup> Occupational and status mobility reduces ethnic consciousness because the group's members acquire new economic interests which are inconsistent with continued ethnic voting.<sup>5</sup> Another factor in the process is that upward mobility leads to interaction with the middle and upper strata of society. This interaction reduces the saliency of ethnicity to the voting decision because acculturation to new values requires either abandonment or severe alteration in one's old values.<sup>6</sup> Presumably, then, those groups which have already gone through the process of "Americanization" are the least ethnically conscious. These groups are likely to be primarily party voters. It is in this connection that Professor Lockard states:

"Party allegiance is often stronger than ethnic ties, so that a candidate outside the ethnic group still wins. Although it is difficult to prove this point conclusively, it would appear that the pull of ethnic group affiliation is strong only when the candidate has some other attraction to the voter."<sup>7</sup>

In the earlier stages of status development, a tension may exist between the cues issued by the party and the ethnic consciousness of a particular ethnic group.<sup>8</sup> Once the group has assimilated, however, ethnic cues will diminish and party cues can be expected to dominate.<sup>9</sup>

Standing in opposition to the assimilation theory is the mobilization theory. Where as theorists of the assimilation school argue that ethnicity is probably less salient once members of a particular ethnic group achieve middle-class status or something approaching it, proponents of the mobilization theory maintain that ethnicity is likely to remain an important factor in the voting decision even after this higher status position has been reached.<sup>10</sup> In order for an ethnic group to identify with a candidate of similar ethnic background, so the argument runs, the candidate must be highly "visible" to the ethnic electorate, that is, the group must somehow view the election as important to the interests of the group. Given the usual low level of political

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<sup>4</sup> Duane Lockard, "Ethnic Elements in New England Politics," in Charles Press and Oliver Williams, *Democracy in the Fifty States* (Chicago: Rand-McNally Co., 1966), p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfinger, p. 906.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Also see Dahl, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 200.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfinger, *op. cit.*, p. 908.

<sup>9</sup> The presupposition is that parties will reflect clear positions on socio-economic issues, a doubtful hypothesis in light of party programs expressed thus far by parties at the local level.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfinger, *op. cit.*, p. 905.



interest of the electorate, "visibility" normally means that the contest must be fought around a major political office. But this implies that the group must have already reached a relatively high level of socio-economic status so that it is able to generate its own leaders rather than just sub-leaders for other ethnic groups. If elections are to be meaningful events for an ethnic group, that is, if ethnic loyalty is to be reflected in the voting decision then "native" leaders must be generated by the ethnic group itself. The mobilization theory thus concludes that ethnicity will continue to be a relevant factor in voting behavior even after the group has "arrived" in the socio-economic sense.<sup>11</sup>

Without attempting to get involved in the logical intricacies of either theory, this paper will try to examine the conclusions of both theories in light of the research data gathered on Democratic mayoralty primary elections in Providence, Rhode Island. Two ethnic groups were selected for analysis, the Irish and the Italians, simply because they are the two largest groups residing within the Providence city limits. Certain assumptions about the degree of development attained by each ethnic group are made. Which of the two groups, the Irish or the Italians, is further along in the process of assimilation? It may be assumed that the propensity of an ethnic group to develop a higher socio-economic status, with the value changes that such status implies, is to a large extent a function of the length of time that the group has resided within the United States.<sup>12</sup> In Providence, this means that the Irish are more likely to have developed a higher status, and different values, than the Italians who arrived on the scene somewhat later. A second method of determining which group is more within the mainstream of American middle-class values is to examine the population distribution pattern of each group within the city. The group which is most assimilated is likely to reflect a scattered residential pattern characteristic of a group which no longer finds it necessary to live in ethnic enclaves for protection. Further, a group which reflects this type of pattern is likely to occupy the higher paying occupational positions which afford its members the opportunity to move out of the enclaves. As such, a scattered residential pattern is likely to indicate higher socio-economic status. Conversely, the group which is least assimilated is likely to be more concentrated in its residential distribution patterns.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> This is the upshot of Wolfinger's thesis. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan in their work, *Beyond The Melting Pot* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963) appear, in essence, to agree.

<sup>12</sup> The negro is of course the obvious exception.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to acknowledge my debt to Dr. Philip Coulter for his insight into the subject of population distribution and its relation to ethnic assimilation.

**Table I**  
**Distribution of Registered Voters**  
**By Ethnic group**

<i>Ward</i>	<i>% Italian</i>	<i>% Irish</i>
1	1%	32%
2	2%	23%
3	3%	32%
4	59%	14%
5	40%	28%
6	38%	22%
7	52%	15%
8	14%	33%
9	6%	40%
10	6%	33%
11	7%	33%
12	8%	29%
13	71%	7%

table which appears above lists the percentage of registered voters of Irish and Italian descent living within each ward. It would appear that the Irish are far more dispersed in their residential distribution patterns than are the Italians. Further, if one examines the percentage of foreign born of each ethnic group by ward, one not only finds that there are three times as many Italians still classified in this category than there are Irish, a fact indicative of the higher status of the Irish, but also that an identical pattern of concentration and dispersion emerges. It would therefore seem valid to conclude, at least to the extent that the initial assumptions about population distribution are correct, that the Irish are more assimilated into the American value structure than are the Italians.

Two hypotheses may be tentatively offered. First, if the assimilation theory is correct, then the Irish are least likely to be ethnically oriented in their voting behavior, while the Italians will be more ethnically oriented. Second, if the mobilization theory is correct, it can be expected, given the different socio-economic levels of the two groups, that the Italians will be less ethnically oriented in their voting behavior than the Irish. While it is clear that this study does not succeed in proving conclusively the validity of either theory, it is hoped that an analysis of the data gathered from the voting habits of Irish and Italian wards in Providence will allow some general suggestions as to the validity of each theory.

### The Research Design

The data in this study were based on an examination of six Democratic primary elections contesting the party endorsement for the

mayoralty post. Since 1948, the year in which Rhode Island adopted a primary law, only six primary contests concerning this office have taken place. Four of those six contests witnessed an Irish candidate opposed by an Italian candidate. The remaining two contests were between two Irish candidates. Primary contests in Rhode Island are strictly partisan affairs. Although any voter may participate in a primary election, once he has voted in a primary or signed the nomination papers of a candidate, he may not cast his vote in the opposite party's primary for twenty-six months. In a city which holds its primary elections every twenty-four months, this provision does not succeed in disenfranchising many voters for the simple reason that most Providence residents are heavily committed to the Democratic Party. Republican primaries are only rarely held in Providence, a fact significant in itself, and their turn-out rates are quite small. The dominance of the Democratic Party in Providence city politics makes voting in a Republican primary election a cathartic act.

It would be expected that in a situation in which one party is clearly dominant that voter attention would have shifted away from the general election to the primary election. V.O. Key in his book, *American State Politics: An Introduction*, argues that:

"As the normal balance of electoral strength shifts to the advantage of one party, popular attention tends to center in the direct primary of that party, the arena of governing decision in the politics of the state."<sup>14</sup>

While this might be true on a state level, it is definitely not the case in Providence city politics. Although it is true that the Democratic Party is clearly in a dominant position in Providence politics, the expected switch in voter attention has not occurred. Turnout for the general election is invariably higher in Providence than for the primary election, a fact frequently bemoaned by Ital-unendorsed candidates seeking the party endorsement.<sup>15</sup>

Primary elections were chosen for this analysis for two reasons. First, it is assumed that in a one-party dominant system like Providence politics, a built-in brake controls for the pull of habitual party attachments. Because primary contests do not require the desertion of one's traditional party loyalty in voting for an ethnic candidate, party loyalty is less likely to overwhelm other factors, such as ethnic loyalty, as determinants of the voting decision. To the extent that party loyalty is not in competition with ethnic loyalty as determinants of the vote, the more likely is ethnicity to be an important factor in the voting decision.

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<sup>14</sup> V.O. Key, *American State Politics: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Co., 1956), p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Potentially there are almost three times as many Italian as Irish voters in Providence.

Second, the selection of primary elections would seem to control for the pull of socio-economic forces upon the voting decision.<sup>16</sup> Philips Cutright and Peter H. Rossi maintain that:

" . . . primary elections occur within each major party. Each party is a relatively homogeneous group, as compared with the variation in a wide number of socio-economic characteristics between parties. Hence the factors which help to account for so much of the variation in the vote garnered by each candidate in a general election do not apply in primary elections."<sup>17</sup>

Where political parties are based upon socio-economic cleavages it can be expected that socio-economic considerations will dominate the voting decision in most cases. The success with which scholars have met in correlating voting behavior to socio-economic status suggests the validity of this contention. If factions within the party are based upon socio-economic cleavages, as they are in Louisiana for example, then socio-economic considerations may be expected to exercise a heavy influence on voting behavior even in primary elections. But this is not the case in Providence city politics. The relative socio-economic homogeneity of the city residents in Providence does not give rise to a factional politics based on socio-economic cleavages.<sup>18</sup> Although factionalism is commonplace within the Democratic Party, the impression one receives is that the factions are based primarily upon ethnic loyalties and personalities. The latter is an occurrence found in most one-party dominant systems. But ethnic based factions are most likely to exist where socio-economic cleavages are unimportant. The point is that to the extent that socio-economic cleavages are unimportant to the electorate, factional politics must find its base elsewhere. In Providence, the two largest ethnic groups can readily provide that base.

Ward data were chosen for several reasons. First, they were readily available by simply tallying the totals for the election districts within each ward. Second, the ward boundaries have remained constant. No redistricting has occurred during the 1948-1966 period under examination thereby making the wards very easy to use. Third, the two ethnic groups under consideration manifest heavy concentrations of population within certain wards making them easily identifiable. The further fact that the city council and the party city committee are based upon ward representation suggests their importance as the basic electoral units

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this is valid only outside the South where cleavage based factions are not the rule.

<sup>17</sup> Philips Cutright and Peter H. Rossi, "Party Organization in Primary Elections," *American Journal of Sociology* (1958), p. 262.

<sup>18</sup> Sidney Goldstein and Kurt Mayer, "Metropolitanization and Population Change in Rhode Island," a monograph prepared for the Rhode Island Development Council by the Sociology Department at Brown University (December, 1961), p. 35.

in Providence politics. Fourth, the heavy concentrations of Irish and Italians in certain wards increases the probability that the "breakage" or "cluster" effect will operate thereby increasing the probability that ethnic voting will manifest itself most clearly at the ward level.<sup>19</sup>

### Definitions

The procedure followed in this study is a relatively simple one. The thirteen wards of Providence had to be first divided into three categories: Irish wards, Italian wards, and mixed wards. These categories were developed through a two step process. First, the thirty-seven census tracts of the 1960 Providence SMSA were converted to ward data by the areal-grid method in order to determine the percentages of foreign stock Irish and Italian residents within each ward.<sup>20</sup> It was immediately apparent from the resulting figures that there were far more Italians in this category than there were Irish. This is a reflection of the fact that the Italians arrived much later, almost sixty years later, than the Irish. But the concentration of each group within certain wards suggests that there is very little competition between the two groups in wards in which one or the other group is politically dominant. So that while it is true that the percentages of foreign stock are generally higher for the Italians, the wards with the heaviest concentrations are virtually segregated from each other.<sup>21</sup>

The second step was to determine what percentage of the registered voters in each ward were Irish and Italian. These figures were taken from the *Survey of Rhode Island Electors*, a document published by the Board of Elections in 1954 which lists the percentage of Italian and Irish registered voters for each ward.<sup>22</sup> The registration figures clearly demonstrate not only the concentration of ethnic populations in certain wards, but the greater political activity of the Irish as a group.<sup>23</sup> It should be pointed out that the heaviest concentrations of Irish and Italian voters coincided in every case with the highest concentrations of foreign stock. Also, the Irish have a slight edge in registered voters in the Mixed Wards category.

Once these two sets of figures were obtained, they were averaged to construct an Index Of Ethnic Concentration. The results of these

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<sup>19</sup> For a further explanation of the breakage effect see Daniel Katz and Samuel Eldersveld, "The Impact of Local Party Activity Upon the Electorate," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1961), pp. 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> By foreign stock I mean the standard census definition which includes persons of mixed parentage.

<sup>21</sup> This conclusion is in agreement with the position taken by Sidney Goldstein and Kurt Mayer in their work, "The People of Rhode Island: 1960," a monograph prepared for the R. I. Development Council, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> I am deeply indebted to Professor Elmer Cornwell of Brown University who graciously provided me with these figures.

<sup>23</sup> These figures appear in Table I on page 6 of this study.

computations appear in Table II. The figures which appear under the headings “% Italian” and “% Irish” represent the percentage of the ward population designated as Irish or Italian. By selecting the top four wards for each ethnic group, that is those wards which reflected the highest percentage of ward population designated as Irish or Italian, the

**Table II**  
**Index of Ethnic Concentration**

<i>Ward</i>	<i>% Italian</i>	<i>% Irish</i>
1	1.4%	17.0%
2	1.6%	14.1%
3	2.1%	18.9%
4	45.9%	8.7%
5	31.7%	18.0%
6	32.3%	13.2%
7	40.7%	8.7%
8	12.0%	18.6%
9	5.2%	23.6%
10	19.7%	4.3%
11	6.1%	21.8%
12	6.5%	18.7%
13	54.1%	5.0%

following three categories of wards could be produced. The results appear below in Table III. It could not be assumed, however, that the wards in the Mixed category were ethnically balanced in their composi-

**Table III**  
**Wards Comprising Each Category**

<i>Irish</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Mixed</i>
3	4	1, 2
9	6	5
11	7	8
12	13	10

tion. Though it is true that Italian foreign stock generally outnumbers the Irish foreign stock, even in the mixed wards, the Irish have a generally higher percentage of registered voters in these wards allowing the Irish to offset the numerical superiority of the Italians. It was necessary, therefore, to determine which ethnic group possessed the advantage, and how much of an advantage, in the mixed wards. This was done by finding the mean percentage of the respective ethnic populations for the five wards in the mixed category. The results appear in Table IV. A glance at the figures in Table IV would suggest that the mixed

**Table IV**  
**Index of Ethnic Advantage in Mixed Wards**

Irish .....	14.4%
Italian .....	13.3%
	<hr/>
	1.1% (Irish)

wards are highly competitive in terms of their ethnic populations. But a careful examination of Table II shows, however, that the Italian percentage is raised by the concentrations in wards 5 and 10, whereas the Irish population is much more evenly distributed throughout all the wards. The further fact that the Irish are generally more politically active suggests that the advantage of the Irish in the mixed wards is considerably higher than the figures in Table IV tend to indicate. It would come as no surprise, then, to discover that the wards in this category are more likely to support an Irish candidate than an Italian candidate; nor that the margin of victory does not hover around the fifty percent mark.

Having finally divided the wards into three categories, it was necessary to define the ethnic background of the candidates as either Irish or Italian. A candidate was assigned to an ethnic group on the basis of his last name. Had any candidate presented a name which could not be readily identified as Irish or Italian, he would have been eliminated from consideration. Fortunately, no cases produced this predicament.

### The Irish

Perhaps one of the most important reasons in explaining Irish domination in Providence politics is simply that they were the first large immigrant group to arrive in Rhode Island, indeed in the country. Census records show that the peak year of the Irish invasion was 1850, a year in which the population rose 35.6% in a mere decade.<sup>24</sup> Like most immigrants elsewhere, the Irish were not welcomed by the native old-stock groups. Fearing the loss of their political control to the Irish, the Yankees took deliberate steps to exclude the "newer races" from the political process.<sup>25</sup> There is little doubt that the desire for political power and recognition drove the Irish into the ranks of the Democratic Party. But of at least equal importance was the fact that the nativist attempts to persecute the Catholic Irish, an occurrence common to almost all the northeast, forced the Irish to look to the political process and rapidly increasing Catholic membership of the Democratic

<sup>24</sup> See Goldstein and Mayer, "The People of Rhode Island: 1960," *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent analysis of the voting restrictions endured by the immigrant groups in Rhode Island see Chilton Williamson, "Rhode Island Suffrage Since the Dorr War," *New England Quarterly*, (March, 1955), pp. 34-50.

Party for protection.<sup>26</sup> By 1932, and long before that in the urban centers of the state, the Irish had gained complete control of Rhode Island politics. Even today, their hold over Providence city politics is extremely strong.

A sense of the strength of Irish control in Providence politics can be obtained from the following figures. In 1966, despite the fact that the Italians are numerically superior in the city, only eight of the twenty-six councilmen are Italian while thirteen are Irish. This excludes the mayor who is also Irish and who has always been an Irishman since the Democrats took over from the Republicans. There has never been an Italian mayor in Providence. Out of a total of one hundred and twenty party city committeemen, only thirty-two are Italian while seventy-one, more than twice as many, are Irish. The party chairman, Larry McGarry, is also Irish. Control of the city committee is essential to continued Irish dominance since it is this organization which endorses candidates for city-wide office. Of equal importance is the fact that out of a total of thirteen ward chairmen, only three are Italian while the remaining ten are Irish. These figures demonstrate quite clearly that although the Italians are numerically dominant in Providence, they have only begun to infiltrate the party organization.<sup>27</sup>

Like the Boston Irish, the Irish in Providence developed an early affinity for hills. Slowly but surely they drove the Yankees from the East Side, Smith Hill, Federal Hill and Mount Pleasant. But by and large the Irish remained city dwellers, content to leave the suburbs to the Yankees and the more status conscious Italians. In a state where there are large concentrations of Italians in the suburbs, it is remarkable, considering that they arrived much earlier, that the Irish have yet to stake out a suburb to themselves. This is not to imply, however, that the Irish have forsaken the upward pull of middle-class status. Quite to the contrary. But they have defined higher status within an urban environment, seeking the better sections of the city, not the suburbs, as dwelling places. The more successful Irish—one still hears the term lace-curtain Irish—have sought the better neighborhoods of the city, frequently submerging the Yankees in their wake or driving them out completely. Thus, to the extent that middle-class cultures

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<sup>26</sup> Murray and Susan Stedman, "The Rise of the Democratic Party of Rhode Island," *New England Quarterly*, (September, 1951), p. 337.

<sup>27</sup> Professor Elmer Cornwell finds that because of the Irish refusal to allow Italians into controlling party positions, some Italian politicians have sought attachments with the Republican Party. While this is generally correct, it must be hastily added that the Italians as a voting bloc have not seen fit to follow their lead. Although an Italian was elected governor on the Republican ticket in 1958, and although there is some evidence to suggest that upper-strata Italian voters are switching to the Republican standard, Italians within the Providence city limits remain overwhelmingly committed to the Democratic Party, at least as far as city elections are concerned. See Elmer E. Cornwell, "Bosses, Machines, and Ethnic Groups," *The Annals* (May, 1964), pp. 27-39.



exist within urban environments, the Irish of Providence occupy this status level.

Politics has always been a respectable profession for the Irish and remains so today. They possess a long tradition of political activity. Moreover, because they live within the city limits, the Irish are more likely to be exposed to political information and personal political contact of a partisan tone than if they lived in the suburbs. The result is that the Irish in Providence are more politically active than any other ethnic group. Further, they are the major recipients of political patronage. One city official interviewed by this writer said that of the three thousand patronage jobs at the mayor's disposal, about one-half go to the Irish. A large percentage of the remaining jobs do go to Italians, however, in an attempt to keep them loyal to the party and the candidates that the party endorses. The result is that the Irish have blocked the political channels thereby preventing other ethnic groups from using them except on the terms the Irish dictate.<sup>28</sup>

### The Italians

One explanation for the subordinate political position of the Italians in Providence is simply that they arrived late. Whereas the Irish wave broke over the state in 1850, it was not until 1910, sixty years later, that the Italians began arriving in large numbers.<sup>29</sup> Coming largely from the poor mountainous regions of southern Italy, most of the Italians who arrived in Rhode Island were poor, illiterate peasants. Moreover, they suffered from the further handicap of not being able to speak the English language. By the time the Italians arrived, the Democratic Party in Providence was already a preserve of the Irish. The Irish were glad to have the votes of the newcomers in the battle against the old stock Republican machine, but the Irish were careful to reserve the positions of power to themselves. The Italians became steadfast supporters of the Democratic Party and its candidates while at the same time relinquishing their voice in deciding who these candidates would be.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "The predominance of the Irish in Democratic politics is hardly unique to Rhode Island, nor even to New England, but in Rhode Island and other New England states it seems to be especially resented since other ethnic minority groups are so numerous and politically potent." in Lockard, *New England State Politics, op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>29</sup> Goldstein and Mayer, "The People of Rhode Island: 1960," *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> The impression may be offered that the Italian emphasis upon the family coupled with a distrust of people outside the family unit may have made the Italian political culture a competitive instead of a co-operative one. Italians, though they do not compete within the family unit, do compete with all outside it, including other Italians. This may explain to some extent why they show a tendency to support non-Italian candidates at the expense of candidates which share an Italian background.

Unlike the Irish, the Italians were not content to remain city dwellers. Perhaps the fact that they came largely from rural backgrounds explains why the Italians sought to leave the city for the suburbs. Another explanation might be that unlike the Irish, the Italians had no part in building the great city complexes of America. They had no familiarity with city life. Whatever the reason, it is a fact that the four largest suburbs around the central city—Johnston, Cranston, North Providence and Warwick—all have heavy concentrations of Italians residing within them. Yet heavy concentrations remain within the city limits, most of which are still classified as foreign stock.<sup>31</sup> Given their late date of arrival, however, it is a safe assumption that most of the Italians within the city are old, largely uneducated, and of lower class status. Whereas some of their children have moved to the better neighborhoods within the city, most of the young Italians have fled to the suburbs leaving their parents and grandparents in the wards of their arrival.

If Robert Dahl's typology of ethnic group maturation may be permitted, it would appear that the Italians in Providence are still in their second stage of development.<sup>32</sup> They have begun to generate their own sub-leaders, but these remain largely subservient to the Irish who control the party organization. No Italian candidate has ever been endorsed by the party for the mayor's office. The Irish on the other hand have gone through all three stages of development. They have long since reached the point where they can generate full-fledged leaders. In short, the Italians in Providence have yet to arrive both politically and socio-economically. The Irish are already there.

### The Ethnic Vote

Given the presence of two large ethnic groups within the confines of the Providence city limits, it is almost certain that political tension between the two groups is bound to emerge. Because the Republican Party is so weak in the city, the conflict cannot be played out between the two political parties. Instead, it tends to focus within the Democratic Party itself. The question is raised as to the role that ethnic loyalty plays in this conflict. Are Italians more likely to vote for an Italian candidate than for an Irish candidate? Do the Irish still react to the pull of ethnic loyalty even though they have gone through all stages of development? An examination of the voting behavior of the

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<sup>31</sup> Goldstein and Mayer note in the work, "Metropolitanization and Population Change in Rhode Island," that the two tracts in the thirteenth ward show the highest rate of population mobility in the city. Undoubtedly these mobiles are the children of the immigrants escaping from the old ghettos.

<sup>32</sup> Dahl, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

two groups suggests that ethnic loyalty does play a role in the voting decision.

If ethnic loyalty affects voting behavior, the percentage of the vote received by Irish candidates should increase as the ward population becomes more heavily Irish. It would be expected that an Irish candidate would receive his lowest percentage of the vote in wards which manifest heavy concentrations of Italians and his highest percentage in heavily Irish wards. The wards in the mixed category should fall somewhere between the two although, as was noted earlier, with a somewhat higher percentage for the Irish candidate than for the Italian candidate. Table V which appears below bears out these expectations.

**Table V**  
**Mean Percentage of the Vote Received**  
**by Irish Candidates in Four Elections**

Irish Wards .....	85.3%
Mixed Wards .....	80.3%
Italian Wards .....	53.3%

It would appear from the figures in the table that the voting behavior of the Irish wards is heavily biased in favor of Irish candidates. This is suggestive of the fact that ethnic loyalty is playing a positive role in the voting decision. The Italian wards seem to manifest a similar concern for ethnic loyalty in executing the voting decision. Table VI below shows that the general trend of the percentage of the vote to

**Table VI**  
**Mean Percentage of the Vote Received**  
**by Italian Candidates in Four Elections**

Italian Wards .....	46.7%
Mixed Wards .....	19.7%
Irish Wards .....	14.7%

increase as the ward becomes more ethnically biased in population holds equally well for the Italians. The trend is clear that Italian candidates, although unendorsed, run much better in Italian wards than in Irish wards. In fact, they run twice as strong as in mixed wards and three times stronger than in Irish wards. Clearly, then, ethnic loyalty is operating on the voting decision. Note that the figures in Tables V and VI tell nothing about the intensity of ethnic voting as it pertains to each group, a point that will receive attention later in this study.

A second way of determining if ethnicity plays a role in the voting decision is to examine turnout rates for Irish and Italian wards. Wil-

liam A. Glaser in his article, "Intention and Voting Turnout," maintains that ". . . the greater the feeling of involvement in the election campaign, the more likely the voter will fulfill a positive intention to vote."<sup>33</sup> If it is assumed that ethnic loyalty is an important factor in the voting decision, it can be hypothesized that turnout rates in Italian wards will be higher when an Italian candidate is running than when no Italian candidate is involved in the contest. Further, it may be suggested that an Irish candidate will draw a heavier turnout in Irish wards when opposed by an Italian candidate than when he is opposed by another Irish candidate. The results of the comparison of ward turnout rates appear below in Table VII. It is clear from the figures in the

**Table VII**  
**Ethnic Candidates and Voting Turnout**

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>% Turnout In Irish Wards</i>	<i>% Turnout In Italian Wards</i>
Italian .....	20.9%	31.0%
Irish .....	21.9%	25.1%

table that turnout rates in Italian wards increase when an Italian candidate is involved in the election contest. When Italian wards are presented with a choice between two Irish candidates, voting turnout drops off an average of 5.9% again suggesting the importance of ethnic feeling in the turnout decision. Moreover, since the turnout decision is a reflection of the voting decision, it may be surmised that ethnic loyalty plays an important role in the voting decision itself.

The Irish wards on the other hand appear at first glance to be less affected by the ethnic background of the candidates than are the Italian wards. Yet, the difference in the Irish turnout rates is so slight, only 1%, that it is possible that it is a reflection of a consistently high level of political participation on the part of the Irish rather than a lack of ethnic feeling. Further, it might be offered here that those Irish voters who are dissatisfied with the administration in power would be more likely to cast their vote against one Irishman and for another. If faced with the choice of voting for an Italian candidate as an act of political protest, assuming the pull of ethnic loyalty, this group of dissidents is more likely not to vote at all. Thus, while the data in Table VII suggest that the Irish are not as ethnically oriented in their voting behavior as are the Italians, the evidence on this point is not conclusive.

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<sup>33</sup> William A. Glaser, "Intention and Voting Turnout," *American Political Science Review*, (December, 1958), p. 1032.

## Ethnic Loyalty and Party Loyalty

So far all that has been measured is that the direction of ethnic loyalty as it affects voting behavior fluctuates with the bias of the ward populations, namely that a certain progression in voter loyalty and turnout tends to coincide generally with a similar progression of ward populations defined as ethnically Irish or Italian. A glance backward at Tables V, VI, and VII will reveal, however, that the relative strengths of the progressions for each ethnic group are unequal. Some method must be found to measure these relative strengths or, if the term may be permitted, the comparative intensity of ethnic voting manifested by each group. One way of solving this difficulty is to calculate an "expected percentage" of the vote for the endorsed and unendorsed candidates, plug in the ethnic background of the respective candidates, and then measure the percentage of the vote obtained in the wards against the expected percentage.<sup>34</sup> The "expected percentage" of the vote was calculated by taking the city-wide percentages received by endorsed and unendorsed candidates for all elections and then calculating the arithmetic mean for each type of candidate. It was found that an en-

**Table VIII**  
**Variation in Mean Percentage of Vote Received**  
**Compared with Mean Percentage of Vote Expected**

<i>% Expected By</i> <i>Endorsed Candidates</i> (71.2%)		<i>% Expected By</i> <i>Unendorsed Candidates</i> (28.8%)	
<i>Irish</i> <i>Endorsed</i> <i>Candidates</i>	<i>Italian</i> <i>Unendorsed</i> <i>Candidates</i>	<i>Irish</i> <i>Unendorsed</i> <i>Candidates</i>	
Irish Wards: 85.3%	Irish Wards: 14.7%	Irish Wards: 22.2%	
Italian Wards: 53.3%	Italian Wards: 46.7%	Italian Wards: 21.3%	

dorsed candidate running on the Democratic ticket for the office of mayor, regardless of ethnic background, could expect to receive 71.2% of the vote. His unendorsed opponent could expect to receive 28.8% of the vote. The figures in Table VIII show quite clearly that the endorsed Irish candidates receive a higher percentage of the vote in Irish wards than they can normally expect. Similarly, Italian unendorsed candidates receive a higher percentage of the vote in Italian wards than they can normally expect. From the figures in Table VIII there can be little doubt that the pull of ethnic loyalty is affecting the voting decision.

<sup>34</sup> For an example of this technique see Philips Cutright and Peter Rossi, "Party Organization in Primary Elections," *American Journal of Sociology*, (1958), pp. 262-269.

The question is raised as to which group, the Irish or the Italians, is more affected by the pull of ethnicity? The following figures suggest some tentative answers. Irish candidates in Irish wards receive 14.1% more than their expected percentage. Italian candidates, however, receive 17.9% more than they can expect. Moreover, in Italian wards an unendorsed Irish candidate receives 6.6% less than he can expect, but 24.5% less than the vote received by an Italian unendorsed candidate. The Irish wards, on the other hand, do not appear as ethnically oriented in their voting patterns as the Italian wards. While it is true that the unendorsed Italian candidate receives 7.5% less than the expected percentage in Irish wards, a figure which is only .9% less than the unendorsed Irish candidate receives in Italian wards, the unendorsed Italian candidate receives only 7.8% less than the 22.2% which unendorsed Irish candidates receive in Irish wards. Whereas the difference between the unendorsed Irish and Italian candidate in Italian wards is 24.5% of the vote in favor of the Italian, in Irish wards this same difference is only 7.8% of the vote in favor of the Irish candidate.

At first glance the above figures seem to demonstrate that the Italian wards are more attuned to ethnic loyalties than are the Irish wards. Yet, the situation is somewhat more complex. If the respective percentages of the vote received by the unendorsed Irish and Italian candidates are compared, a slightly different picture emerges. An examination of the figures in Table IX reveal that Irish unendorsed

**Table IX**  
**Mean Percentage of Vote Received by**  
**Both Irish and Italian Unendorsed Candidates**

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>% Received In Italian Wards</i>	<i>% Received In Irish Wards</i>
Italian .....	46.7%	14.7%
Irish .....	21.2%	22.5%

candidates run considerably stronger in Italian wards than Italian unendorsed candidates do in Irish wards. Although it is true enough that the Italian wards deliver a high percentage of their vote to the Italian unendorsed candidate, they are not likely to complete the circle and vote against an Irish unendorsed candidate simply because he does not share the ethnic background of the ward. The Irish wards, on the other hand, are not only likely to give a heavier percentage of their vote to the Irish unendorsed candidate, but are likely to vote against an Italian candidate in heavier numbers than the Italian wards vote against an Irish candidate.

Nevertheless, if ethnic voting is taken to mean a vote for a candidate with shared ethnic heritage without necessarily implying a vote

against a candidate who does not share that heritage when a choice between the two is not presented, then it is clear that the Italians of Providence are more susceptible to the impact of ethnic loyalty than are the Irish. It would appear that the Irish are more likely to accept the cues put forth by the party via its endorsement of candidates as major determinants of the voting decision. Yet the conclusion remains a tentative one reached indirectly since the Irish monopoly of party endorsements have prevented the occurrence of a test case to gauge the reaction of the Irish wards to a contest in which an endorsed Italian is opposed by an unendorsed Irishman.

The coincidence of ethnic background and party endorsement which the Irish have enjoyed has of course not applied to the Italians. Since most of the city Italians are loyal members of the Democratic Party, one would expect to find a tension existing between what the party demands and what the ethnic group would like. Evidence of this is reflected in the fact that while Italian wards did in fact deliver 46.7% of their vote to the Italian candidate, these same wards gave the remaining 53.3% of their vote to the Irish endorsed candidate. This suggests that at their present stage of development, the Italians, while more ethnically conscious than the Irish, are still more Democratic than Italian in their voting loyalties.

Upon occasion, however, even the barrier of the party endorsement can be overwhelmed in a tide of ethnic feeling. This is most likely to happen when the ethnic group perceives that it has a real chance of winning the contest, such as when an incumbent retires from office and the nomination is subject to dispute. Upon such occasions ethnicity manifests itself quite readily. Such a situation occurred in 1964. The retirement of Mayor Walter Reynolds set the stage for a bitter primary fight between Frank Rao and Joseph Doorley. Doorley won by a 56% to 44% split, but a breakdown of the voting returns clearly reflects the

**Table X**  
**1964 Democratic Primary Contest**  
**Doorley vs. Rao**

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Irish Wards</i>	<i>Mixed Wards</i>	<i>Italian Wards</i>
Doorley	79.0%	70.5%	40.0%
Rao	21.0%	29.5%	60.0%

impact of ethnic loyalty upon the voting decision. Quite clearly ethnic loyalty overrode the pull of the party endorsement in the Italian wards. But the fact that 40% of the voters overlooked their ethnic heritage and that of the candidate and cast their vote for the endorsed candidate even though he was Irish, suggests that the tension between party cues and ethnic loyalty is still strong.

## Conclusions

If any one conclusion emerges from this study it is that ethnic loyalty is an important factor in making the voting decision. If the methodology has succeeded in controlling for the pull of habitual party loyalties and socio-economic factors, then the extra percentage of the vote garnered in wards which reflect an ethnic background similar to that of the candidate can only be explained by the pull of ethnic loyalty upon the voting decision. The further fact that these wards deliver an extra percentage of the vote to candidates who share the ethnic background of the wards regardless of the party endorsement suggests the validity of this conclusion.

The importance of ethnic loyalty to the voting decision appears to be greater in Italian wards than in Irish wards. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that the Italians are still by and large a lower class group which is unsure of its position in the city. They have yet to be assimilated to the same extent as the Irish. In such a situation, their feeling of ethnic uniqueness appears to be stronger than that of the ethnic groups which arrived earlier. Yet it must be pointed out that their traditional attachment to the Democratic Party and the fact that the Irish leaders of the party have taken great care to give the Italians a share in city patronage have combined to produce a hard core of Italian voters who feel that they have more to gain under the present system than if an Italian was in office.

The data in this study suggest the conclusion that the Irish wards are less ethnically conscious than are the Italian wards, at least as far as discernible voting behavior is concerned. No doubt this is due partly to their dominant position in Providence politics which has assured a coincidence of Irish candidates with party endorsements. Irish political leaders, on the other hand, appear to be quite conscious of the competitive ethnicity which exists in Providence's political affairs. While they may have been willing to give the Italians a share in the spoils of office and even nominate them for smaller city offices, they have taken great care to reserve the top positions of power to themselves. The organizational structure of the Democratic Party is firmly within their hands making it highly unlikely that an Italian will ever receive the party endorsement for the mayoralty post in the near future. Perhaps a difference exists between the ethnic loyalty possessed by the Irish population and that possessed by their leaders. Whatever the case, the Irish as a voting bloc appear to be less ethnically oriented than the Italians in their voting behavior.

The lower status position of the city Italians and the generally middle class status of the Irish as they both relate to ethnic consciousness in the voting act seems to suggest the validity of the assimilation



theory. Ethnic groups appear to become more conscious of their ethnic identity at that point where they begin to generate their own leaders. It is these leaders which act as stimuli to the system by constantly reminding the group of its uniqueness in order to obtain votes. At this point the group is ready to make its assault on the positions of political power. If the displacement of the dominant group comes about relatively fast, ethnic loyalty as a determinant of voting loyalty will probably quickly fade giving rise to the predominance of party cues. If, on the other hand, the dominant group decides to fight to maintain control of its power positions, a bitterness may be created within the challenging ethnic group which will remain longer after it has become dominant. In this case, ethnic loyalty will probably remain as a strong determinant of voter loyalty long after the battle for political power has been won. Although the question is an open one, it may be suggested that the extent to which an ethnic group will maintain a political solidarity based on ethnic loyalty after it has gained power may be more closely related to the bitterness of the struggle to gain power than to the rising socio-economic status of the group's members. When the struggle is a harsh one, a kind of "critical ethnic alignment" may occur, the effects of which are likely to be felt long after the group has established its political dominance.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Italians of Providence have yet to reach the point where they are able to generate their own leaders, there is little doubt that as they approach that point they are likely to increase their demands for political power. This in itself may rekindle the ethnic loyalties of the Irish. If it does, a bitter fight is likely to follow. Once the Italians reach the point where they are ready to press their demands at the polls, it is hardly likely that they will settle for anything less than control of the major political offices in the city. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that ethnic loyalty will play a considerable role in deciding the future positions of these two groups in Providence politics.

Amherst

June, 1967

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<sup>35</sup> Whether this process will occur within the party to which the challenging group is traditionally attached or between the parties would appear to depend upon other factors such as the ease of access into the non-traditional party and the extent to which other ethnic groups may be rallied to the support of the challenging group should it decide to switch its loyalty to the non-traditional party.







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